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Syria: Sunni Opposition to the Minority Alawite Regime

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A Research Paper

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*NESA 85-10102
June 1985*

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A Research Paper

This paper was prepared by [redacted]
Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. It
was coordinated with the Directorate of
Operations. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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**Syria: Sunni Opposition to the
Minority Alawite Regime**

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Summary*Information available
as of 1 April 1985
was used in this report.*

President Hafiz al-Assad maintains a firm grip on power in Syria, but resentment among the country's majority Sunni population at the predominance of Assad's minority Alawite sect continues to fester. Open Sunni opposition reached a watershed in February 1982 when Assad used a heavy concentration of military force to crush an uprising in the provincial city of Hamah. Sunnis inside Syria have been forced into sullen acquiescence to Assad's rule, but dissidents outside the country have continued at least limited opposition activity.

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Sectarian tension has been a constant factor in Syrian politics since the 1960s. Sunnis once dominated both political and economic life in Syria. Internecine political conflict in the first two decades after independence, however, opened opportunities for members of the traditionally despised Alawite sect in the military and the Ba'th Party to seize control of the state and turn the tables on the entrenched Sunni establishment. Prominent Sunni leaders have fled into exile, suffered arrest and imprisonment, cut deals and arranged marriages to secure entry into the new elite, or lapsed into political inactivity.

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Leadership of the Sunni opposition has devolved to religious leaders in alliance with urban Sunni merchants and artisans whose interests are adversely affected by Alawite and Ba'th Party policies. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has emerged as the key opposition group. Since the abortive Hamah uprising in 1982, the Brotherhood has joined in a "National Alliance" of Assad's Sunni rivals based outside the country.

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The Muslim Brotherhood and the faction-ridden National Alliance lack an organized political base inside Syria or the resources to overturn the regime. Although Assad continues to regard the Brotherhood as a significant threat, his security services have decimated its ranks. The prospects for Sunni-instigated violence over the short term diminished early this year when the President offered conditional amnesty to Muslim Brotherhood members following discussions with one of its most militant factions.

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Assad is unlikely to face a major Sunni challenge as long as he remains in command, but a Sunni bid for power following the President's incapacitation or death cannot be ruled out. At a minimum, Sunni resentment of the excesses of the Alawite security apparatus and of the social and economic gains achieved by others at their expense is likely to contribute to political instability over the longer term. Despite the absence of a well-placed rival elite, sectarian, social, and economic cleavages in Syrian society will pose continuing challenges to Assad's successors.

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When Assad dies, concern among the Alawite elite about Sunni discontent probably will serve to dampen rivalries within the regime and contribute to an orderly succession. The longevity of such a successor regime, however, will depend in part on its ability to replicate Assad's successful combination of repression and co-optation of the Sunni community. A broad-based popular movement or Islamic revolution appears unlikely, but in the context of a succession crisis or in the early stages of a new regime, Sunni officers might seek to take advantage of regime weaknesses to attempt a coup. The Muslim Brotherhood almost certainly would attempt to instigate civil disorders to test the staying power of Assad's successor as president.

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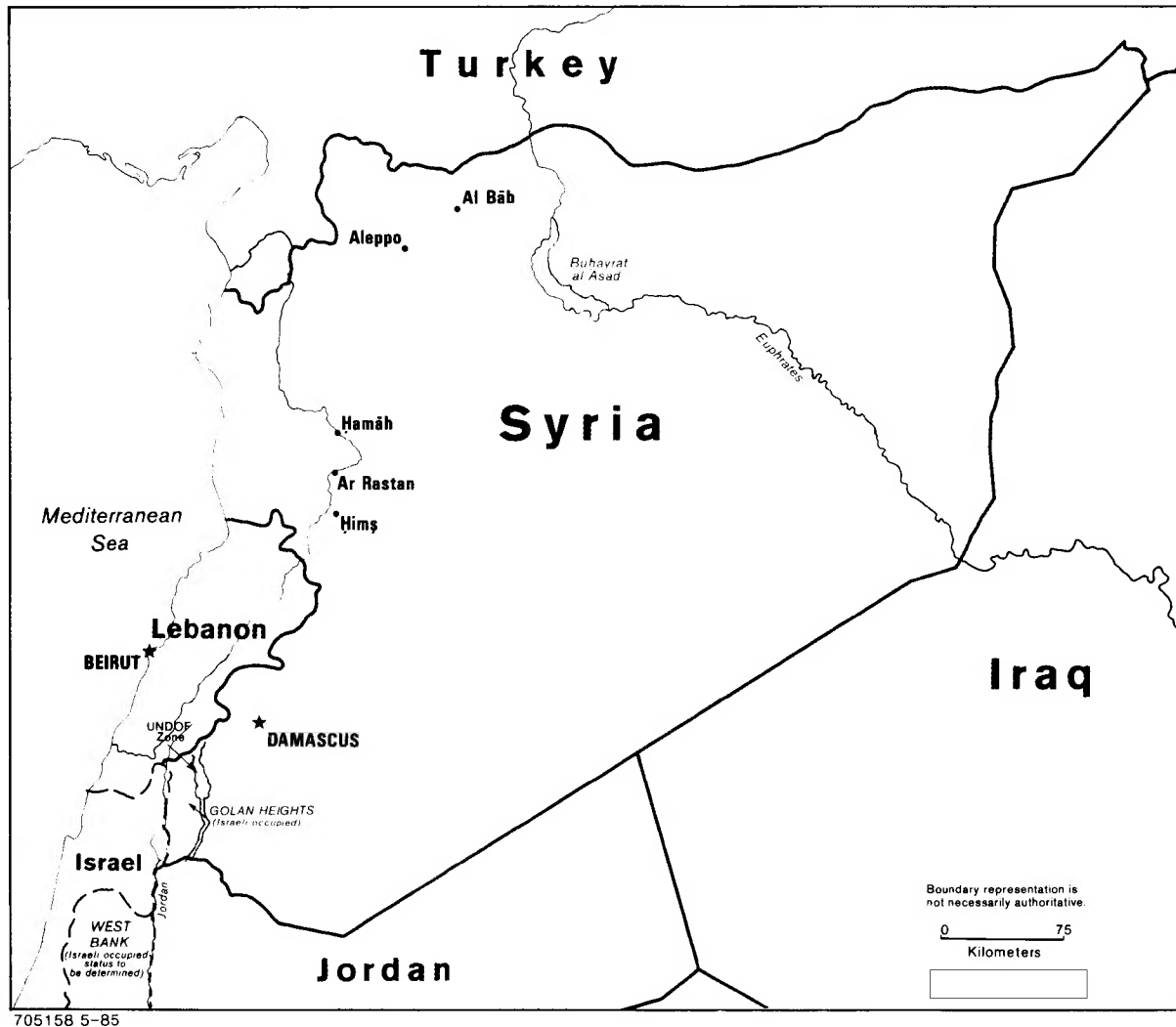
Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Summary	iii
Sunni-Alawite Tension	1
The Sunni Majority Under Assad	1
Continuing Opposition Among Urban Sunnis	3
Regime Security Concerns	4
Prospects	4
Foreign Policy Implications	6
 Appendix	
The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood	7

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Syria: Sunni Opposition to the Minority Alawite Regime

President Assad has brought order to Syria through his highly centralized and personal rule. He has built an effective and sometimes brutal security apparatus and has skillfully manipulated the Ba'th Party to control political participation, make a large sector of the population dependent on the regime through the distribution of government jobs and benefits, and legitimize his policies. Syrian politics in the 15 years since Assad's takeover have been confined largely to interactions within a small inner circle of presidential advisers drawn from the military and security services, from the government bureaucracy, and from the Ba'th Party hierarchy.

Despite the appearance of stability provided by Assad's long tenure in office, sectarian cleavages continue to deeply divide Syrian society. Between 1976 and 1982, Assad faced a significant challenge from Sunni opponents of his minority Alawite regime. Militants carried out a wave of bombings and assassinations of prominent Alawites, murdering several dozen Alawite and Christian officer cadets in one incident in Aleppo in mid-1979 and targeting Assad himself in June 1980 in a grenade attack that killed one of his guards. By early 1981, government spokesmen admitted to over 300 assassinations of persons connected with the regime. Open Sunni opposition continued until February 1982 when the regime used a heavy concentration of military force to crush an uprising in the provincial city of Hamah.

Sunni-Alawite Tension

Sunnis constitute about two-thirds of all Syrians—in contrast to the ruling Alawites, who represent only 10 to 13 percent of the population. Historically, Sunnis predominated in the urban elite that led the country's economic, political, and social life.

Sunni resentment at the rise to power of the Alawite minority continues to fester. To many in the Sunni community, the Alawites are social inferiors best left alone in their homeland in the rural, mountainous

area of northwest Syria. Most Sunnis regard Alawites as heretics because the Alawites view Ali, the nephew and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, as an incarnation of God. Prior to Syrian independence in 1946, the limited educational opportunities open to Alawites and their exclusion from avenues of social mobility fueled a vicious cycle of Sunni prejudice and discrimination against them. The Alawites most often found places in Syrian society as servants, garbage collectors, shoe-shine boys, and the like.

The collapse of Sunni dominance and the rise to power of Alawite leaders took place during two decades of political turmoil following Syrian independence. The Sunni "club" of leading families had—and lost—its chance to rule as a succession of governments in the 1950s and early 1960s proved unable to cope with domestic problems of corruption, inefficiency, and inflation, or with regional issues such as the establishment of the state of Israel. With Syrian politics polarized by the conflict between the old Sunni establishment and new middle-class political factions, Alawites rising through the Syrian officer corps and the leftist-oriented Ba'th Party took control of the government.

The Sunni Majority Under Assad

President Assad benefited initially from the political exhaustion of rival forces in Syrian politics. Scholars note that after the frequent changes of governments in the years before his takeover in 1970, Assad was greeted with relief by many Sunnis. The new President was viewed as a moderate pragmatist in contrast to his more radical, short-lived predecessors and as a leader who could end political uncertainty.

Syria's Sunni majority under Assad remains politically divided by enduring social cleavages and by differences over the appropriate response to Alawite dominance and regime repression. Local observers of the

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President Hafiz al-Assad [redacted]

France and construction firms in Syria and the Gulf states—has taken pains to cut the President's brother Rif'at into some of his more lucrative projects, according to the US Embassy in Damascus. [redacted]

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Many *religious leaders* have retreated into silent opposition to the regime or submitted to its restrictions on their activity. Through the Ministry of Religious Trusts, the regime exercises tight control over the preaching of the shaykhs. [redacted]

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[redacted] many Sunni religious leaders, lacking the means or the courage to oppose the regime, have adopted the principle that "when you can no longer counter your enemy, take his hand and hope that the good Lord will break it." [redacted]

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Sunnis in the 1980s believe that potential leaders among the Sunni community are split among several subgroups. [redacted]

Traditional notable families in many cases have long since ceased to play a significant political role. Some members of the old elite with a religious orientation have gone into exile in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, and Europe. Those drawn to the political left fled to Iraq, Algeria, or France. Some Syrian Nasirists remained in Egypt after 1961 when Syria broke up the union between the two countries (the United Arab Republic established in 1958). Many of the old notable families remained in Syria but ceased political activity. [redacted]

The landowning and mercantile elites were hard hit by the socialist policies first implemented during Syria's union with Egypt and subsequently continued by Ba'th Party leaders in the 1960s. Nationalization of industry and commerce and land reform stripped the old establishment of its power. Some wealthy Sunnis fled with their fortunes to Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, or Europe, while others sought various means of survival under the more pragmatic Assad regime. [redacted]

Sunnis remain prominent in Syrian commerce. Some Sunni families were able to protect their property interests despite Ba'th Party reform efforts by carefully distributing land or industrial facilities to relations and trusted friends or by cutting deals with the new elite. Prominent Sunni businessman Othman Aidi, for example—who presides over a business empire encompassing banks in Switzerland and

Sunnis willing to reach an accommodation with the ruling Alawites are prominent at the top levels of the government, the Ba'th Party, and the military and security apparatus. Assad has maintained at least the appearance of a multiconfessional regime by forging political alliances with Sunnis who share the Alawites' rural background or who have used their connections to the new elite to rise through the ranks. Scholars note that most Sunni officers who have risen to conspicuous military positions during the past 20 years have come from country towns and rural areas or from city districts inhabited by former peasants. Chief of Staff Shihabi, for example, is from Al Bab, a small town near Aleppo, and Minister of Defense Talas is from Ar Rastan, a town between Hamah and Hims. Vice President Khaddam is a Sunni, but he is married to a woman of the Hawwash family, which provided the leadership of the Assads' Alawite tribal subject in Ottoman times. [redacted]

Conditions for many middle- and lower-class Sunnis have improved under Ba'th Party rule, and the nature of the community has altered as individuals have adapted to change. We believe families uprooted from their villages, taking up new, more secular lifestyles in the cities, have left behind both traditions and a politically meaningful Sunni identity. The Ba'th Party and its numerous affiliated popular institutions have supplanted the Sunni-dominated political parties of the 1950s. [redacted]

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Continuing Opposition Among Urban Sunnis

With the defeat or political co-optation of large segments of the Sunni population, leadership of the organized Sunni opposition to Alawite rule has devolved to an alliance of dissident Sunni religious leaders and the urban merchant community. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood emerged as the leading opponent of the Alawites and the Ba'th Party as early as the 1960s, mobilizing popular conservative sentiment against the secular orientation of the new elite on behalf of the urban merchants. Merchants resentful of government interference in trade—and fearing that Ba'thist socialism is a weapon in the hands of long neglected and suppressed rural people to exact revenge against the cities—have supported the Brotherhood and contributed to a revival of Islam as an answer to wrenching change and the loss of unity within the Sunni community. []

Assad's massive use of force against Brotherhood-led Sunni militants at Hamah in 1982 has forced dissident leaders to retreat from open opposition. []

the Brotherhood has abandoned the emphasis it had placed on armed struggle because its paramilitary organization inside Syria was seriously disrupted by the debacle at Hamah. A Muslim Brotherhood leader said in an interview in early 1983 that the opposition had underestimated the repressive response of the regime. He added that the opposition would have to adopt new tactics to avoid placing the civilian population in a crossfire between the militants and the government. []

The Sunni opposition has shifted to political and organizational activity since 1982. The Muslim Brotherhood merged with other Islamic groups in 1980 to form an "Islamic Front" and then entered an even broader opposition coalition in 1982 that has taken the name "The National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria." Leaders of the group include Adnan Sa'd al-Din, an educator from Hamah in exile since the early 1960s and a prominent leader of the Muslim Brotherhood; Shaykh Muhammad al-Bayanuni, a 41-year-old cleric from Aleppo and the head of the "Islamic Front"; and a disparate assortment of formerly prominent Sunni political leaders now in exile. []



Adnan Sa'd al-Din []

Overt political activity by the Muslim Brotherhood and the National Alliance has been confined primarily to issuing press releases from Europe denouncing the regime and outlining a liberal platform for a new "Islamic" government. []

[] the coalition calls for free, universal elections for a new Syrian parliament representing all political and sectarian factions, new presidential elections, and government rule under Islamic law. []

[] Muslim Brotherhood leadership suggest that leading Sunni dissidents occupy themselves for the most part with debates over the leadership of the opposition coalition and the design of a future Islamic order. []

The Muslim Brotherhood nevertheless continues to attempt limited independent operations from bases in Iraq. []

[] the Brotherhood shifted its administrative headquarters from Amman to Baghdad in 1983. Brotherhood leaders wished to reduce their vulnerability to Assad's security forces—acting on the assumption that the regime has comparatively greater freedom in Jordan to initiate operations against them—and to gain access to the inadequately patrolled Syrian-Iraqi border to conduct infiltration and exfiltration of personnel and materiel. []

Several regional states provide at least indirect support for the Muslim Brotherhood, while funds and materiel come from a network of sympathizers and

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members throughout the Middle East and Europe.

Iraqi authorities provide camps for training in paramilitary tactics in addition to giving the Brotherhood safehaven and freedom of movement.

Brotherhood officials are allowed to move into and out of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states to maintain contacts with their adherents, although their political activities are restricted. The organization acquires arms from the open and black market in Europe with funds provided by wealthy sympathizers and mandatory donations from members.

Regime Security Concerns

The Assad regime continues to regard the Muslim Brotherhood as a significant threat.

Syrian security forces noted a resurgence in Brotherhood activities last fall when antigovernment pamphlets appeared in Damascus, Aleppo, Hamah, and Hims after a major Islamic holiday. senior personnel changes in Syrian Military Intelligence—including the replacement of the official responsible for security in the Damascus area—following the escape from a facility in Damascus of prisoners affiliated with the Brotherhood in early September. In early December last year, Rif 'at al-Assad, acting in his new capacity as Vice President for Security Affairs, told a group of senior security officials that he wanted more attention paid to radical religious groups operating in Syria.

Despite the government's concern, the prospects for Sunni violence in the short term diminished when the regime announced early this year a conditional amnesty for members of the "Fighting Vanguard" faction of the Muslim Brotherhood. The "Fighting Vanguard" (*al-Taliah al-Muqatilah*) is the name adopted by a younger, more militant wing of the Brotherhood when it broke with the more conservative leadership in late 1981 and followed Adnan Uqlah, a civil engineer and former military officer, into the ill-fated Hamah uprising.

security officials see the amnesty offer as a means of monitoring the militants' activities more

closely and bringing them under tighter control, although they have no illusions about the prospects for total compliance with the terms of the amnesty.

The amnesty offer to Brotherhood members is characteristic of Assad's carrot and stick tactics toward his Sunni opponents since the Hamah uprising. In the summer of 1982, only months after the regime put down the insurrection, Assad sent Chief of Staff General Shihabi to Saudi Arabia to try to reach an accommodation with Muslim Brotherhood political leader Sa'd al-Din,

In mid-1983 the regime again offered to drop charges against Brotherhood members abroad willing to surrender to Syrian authorities. Meanwhile, the security forces continued to round up militants inside Syria.

Assad's amnesty offer to the Fighting Vanguard faction in January almost certainly was designed to advance his broader political and foreign policy objectives as well as to deal with the immediate security issue.

Assad wanted to demonstrate his regime's political stability and boost his popularity with the Sunni community before the presidential referendum in February. In addition, Assad probably hoped to reduce the possibility that PLO Chairman Arafat might exploit longstanding Fatah-Muslim Brotherhood links to stir up trouble in Syria in retaliation for Syrian operations against Palestinian moderates and Jordanians supporting the Jordan/PLO talks on an approach to negotiations with Israel.

Prospects

In our judgment, Assad is unlikely to face a major challenge from the Sunni opposition as long as he remains in command. His effective use of repression has deprived his Sunni opponents of an organized base inside Syria. His aging Sunni political rivals—in exile since the 1960s—are divided by ideological differences and have failed to develop a younger generation

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of successors. Within the broader Sunni community, appreciation of the stability provided by Assad's rule, while less than enthusiastic, has had an apparent dampening effect on the ability of Assad's opponents to drum up mass support. Despite heightened tension at the time of Assad's hospitalization in November 1983 and the power struggle among rivals in Assad's inner circle in early 1984, we detected no indication of a Sunni effort to take advantage of Assad's temporary incapacitation. []

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Assad's death, however, will leave Syria without an heir apparent—unless he takes the uncharacteristic and unlikely step of naming his successor—and will set the stage for a struggle for power at senior levels of the regime. Assad's watchdog security services that check dissent within the military are comprised of networks based on personal loyalties already under strain because of conflict over the succession issue. The excesses of the regime's security forces, official corruption, the poor state of Syria's economy, and Syrian isolation in the Arab world represent potentially powerful themes available to a Sunni contender seeking popular support for a bid to exploit divisions in the regime and end Alawite dominance once Assad has departed the scene.¹ []

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In the short run, fear of a Sunni backlash against the Alawites probably will contribute to an orderly succession. Assad's lieutenants are likely to subordinate personal rivalries to ensure their survival, in our judgment. Regime leaders have a common interest in heading off an internecine struggle and a coup or the possible collapse of political order. Short-term continuity in regime policy and the survival of a regime coalition representing both Alawites and rural-based Sunnis—together with the disarray within the Sunni opposition—probably will forestall an immediate Sunni challenge to a new regime. []

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Nevertheless, a successor regime will have difficulty establishing its legitimacy and consolidating control over the longer term. The cleavage in the social base of Syrian politics between the still relatively new, rural-based elite of Alawites and their Sunni allies on

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the one hand and the urban-centered Sunni opposition on the other will continue to offer Sunni dissidents opportunities to challenge a new government. []

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We believe a Sunni challenge to Assad's successors in the long term probably would take the form of terrorism or insurrection in provincial urban centers. The available information on the activities of the National Alliance suggests that the Sunni opposition's effort to build a broad-based coalition has had only limited success. The Muslim Brotherhood, the key organized group within the coalition, on the other hand, has a decentralized structure that is more effective for limited operations against government authority than for a coordinated mass movement. The Brotherhood historically has failed to advance a programmatic solution to social or economic issues or the problems of government, but its formulas and slogans—"God is our end; His Messenger our example; the Koran our constitution; the jihad our path; and death for God's cause our highest desire"—have helped keep alive conservative Islamic resentment of Alawite dominance and stimulate narrow-based challenges to Ba'th Party rule. []

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A Sunni challenge to Assad's successors in the form of an attempted coup is also possible over the longer term. Sunni military officers are well placed to take advantage of any weakening of Alawite defenses against a challenge. Assad's successors may prove less adept at constructing and maintaining the security "wall" around Damascus that Assad erected to prevent a repetition of the cycle of coups and counter-coups that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. Assad's reliance on officers personally loyal to him yet antagonistic to each other has created a system that will be difficult to maintain once he departs the scene. []

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We believe a Sunni challenge to the new regime would be unlikely to take the form of a broad-based popular movement or Islamic revolution. To succeed, mass opposition pitting Sunnis against the new regime would require breaking the coalition of Alawites and rural Sunnis, destroying military discipline and Ba'th Party identification, and detaching peasants, workers, and the salaried middle class from their dependence

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on state and party institutions. These groups would be unlikely to favor a "revolution" bringing an elite allied with landlords and wealthy merchants back to power or an enhanced role for the clergy or religious law in public life. In contrast to Algeria, Iran, or Afghanistan, the Syrian Ba'th Party has an indigenous national character that deprives an opposition movement of the opportunity to fuse revolutionary Islam with nationalist resentment at a foreign or foreign-dominated regime. [redacted]



Issam al-Attar [redacted]

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Foreign Policy Implications

Assad's internal security concerns, including his perception of a continuing threat from the Sunni opposition, are a significant element in his design of Syrian foreign policy, in our view. Syrian national interests—avoiding another disastrous defeat in a conflict with Israel, obtaining Soviet military aid, extracting Arab financial support—continue to shape policy, but Assad's overriding interest is the survival of the regime. Domestic political issues narrow his policy options. [redacted]

Assad's support for Iran against Iraq is at least in part the consequence of his conviction that Baghdad supported the Sunni radical-led violence against his regime between 1976 and 1982. Assad must also be aware that the Iraqis continue to support the Muslim Brotherhood, Ba'th Party leaders who split with Assad in the 1960s, and other Sunni dissidents. [redacted]

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Continued Syrian support for international terrorism is significantly influenced by perceived threats to the stability of the regime. The principal targets of Syrian-sponsored terrorist operations consistently have included Assad's political opponents. Muslim Brotherhood leader Issam al-Attar, in exile in West Germany, was the target of at least five assassination attempts by the regime in 1980-82, one of which resulted in the death of his wife. General Muhammad Umran, one of Assad's leading rivals, was murdered in Lebanon in 1972. Former Prime Minister Salah Bitar was assassinated in Paris in 1980, probably as a signal by the regime that it could reach its opponents even in distant exile. [redacted]

Syria's uncompromising position on the Arab-Israeli conflict would be likely to persist regardless of whether Alawites or Sunnis ruled in Damascus, but Sunni opposition to Alawite predominance almost certainly is a significant factor militating against moderation of the Syrian position. Assad probably believes that a reversal of the Syrian position would open the regime to charges that the minority Alawites had sold out Syria and the Arabs to Israel. Rumors of common cause between Syria's Alawite regime and the Government of Israel are a staple of conspiracy thinking even among sophisticated officials and intellectuals in the Arab world. The legitimacy of Assad's regime is based in part on its credentials in the anti-Zionist and Arab nationalist cause, and the need for legitimacy of his successor is likely to dictate a similar position. [redacted]

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Assad's determination to maintain Syrian preeminence in Lebanon almost certainly is reinforced by fear that Sunni opponents of his regime might use bases there to mount operations into Syria. We lack specific details, but US Embassy officers in Damascus believe that many Sunni dissidents fled to the Tripoli area in North Lebanon after the Hamah uprising in 1982, and Beirut has long been a haven for exiled Syrian politicians and dissident intellectuals. [redacted]

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The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood

25X1 The size of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood is impossible to determine. During the late 1940s the organization numbered about 10,000. One scholar estimates that its membership before the Hamah uprising in 1982 was no more than 5,000, but he notes that regime repression since then has almost certainly reduced that figure. The number of "fellow travelers" probably is in the tens of thousands. []

25X1 The Brotherhood has operated inside Syria as a loose front rather than a close-knit organization. In the words of its spokesmen, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood conceives of itself as a "comprehensive movement that, like Islam itself, applies to all dimensions of life and speaks to the heart of the community." []

25X1 To protect its security the Muslim Brotherhood employs a cell structure. Local mosques provide recruiting grounds and meeting places. The localized basis of recruitment and ideological training has contributed to a proliferation of groups with slightly differing ideologies, differences among leaders from various urban centers, and variations in the tactics adopted by the separate branches. []

Origins

25X1 The Muslim Brotherhood came to Syria in the 1930s. It was founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna as an underground society dedicated to the end of colonial rule and the establishment of an Islamic state. The first Syrian adherents were students of Islamic law who had attended courses at Cairo's al-Azhar University or who had been won over by Egyptian Muslim Brothers touring Syria. []

The Muslim Brotherhood fits a pattern of urban social societies first sponsored in Syria during the 19th century by Christian missionaries seeking to foster social change according to Western cultural norms. Adapted as Islamic welfare societies and unlike traditional brotherhoods and guilds, the *jam'iyah* organizations were not built around particular occupations. They drew on diverse segments of

urban society and espoused broad cultural and political objectives, engaging in projects such as providing new schools and health care. In part, Arab nationalism had its origins in one variant of the *jam'iyah*—the political societies formed around the turn of the century by members of the elite. The Muslim Brotherhood drew on another variant of the *jam'iyah*—the Islamic societies formed among the middle classes in urban areas. []

25X1 The precursor to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood appeared first in Aleppo in the late 1930s. The organization called itself "The House of al-Arqam," a reference to one of the earliest converts to Islam. This organization shifted its center to Damascus in 1944 with the approach of independence, adopted the name Muslim Brotherhood, and elected its first Superintendent General. []

25X1 Throughout the first decades after independence the fortunes of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood fluctuated inversely to the fortunes of the urban merchants and artisans who were its principal constituency. Initially, the Brotherhood languished as postwar profiteering and speculation enriched the trading community. The creation of Israel and the defeat of the Arab armies, however, disrupted extensive and longstanding commercial ties between Damascus and Palestine and gave a new impetus to the movement. In the 1950s, Nasirism drew away parts of the Brotherhood's urban base, but the organization recovered again in the early 1960s in response to the challenge posed by the rural-oriented Ba'th Party. []

Social Characteristics

25X1 The earliest leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria commonly were from families of the "men of religion." Mustafa al-Sibai, the first Superintendent General of the society and its leader from 1945 to 1957 came from a family that provided the preachers

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(*khatibs*) for the Grand Mosque in Hims. His successor, Issam al-Attar—who guided the organization until a split in its ranks in 1972 but continues to play a leadership role—was the prayer leader (*imam*) at the mosque of Damascus University. Current leaders of the Brotherhood and its allied organization, including Said Hawwa and Muhammad al-Bayanuni, are “men of religion” and products of the religious education program at Damascus University instituted by Superintendent General Sibai. []

Scholars note that the religious class with which the Muslim Brothers are associated is not very large in Syria. According to one study, whereas in Iran in 1979 there was roughly one *mullah* for every 308 Iranians, in Syria the comparable figure was one *mullah* for every 2,217 Syrians. The statistics almost certainly are imperfect, but the ratio accords with the discernible absence of men of religion from many of Syria’s villages. []

The Syrian religious class, however, is closely linked to the much larger urban class of artisans and small traders that provides the bulk of the Brotherhood’s membership. As a rule, Syrian men of religion cannot live on the income they derive from religious service. Frequently they engage in handicrafts or petty trade. Many of them are drapers, stationers, booksellers, or perfume vendors. []

Urban small tradesmen and artisans were and still are the most religiously oriented class in Syria, according to scholars. They largely observe the precepts of Islam. Numerically, this class is a significant proportion of Syrian society. The old elite of large landowners and their mercantile allies was so small in number that it was overthrown with relative ease by the Ba’thists in the 1960s. By contrast, the small traders and artisans numbered in 1970 nearly a quarter million. With their dependents, they easily accounted for one-sixth of the Syrian population. []

The Militant Factions

In the late 1960s younger Brotherhood members of the Aleppo and Hamah branches, shaken by the Arab military defeat of 1967, agitated for more militant opposition to the regime than the leadership under al-Attar in Damascus would accept. In addition to generational differences and the regional peculiarities

of the branches, economic disparities might have accounted for the ideological variances within the organization. Damascus, as the seat of government, had been more favored economically than the provincial cities. []

The Muslim Brotherhood’s new militants were above all younger and better educated than the more traditional leadership. Adnan Sa’d al-Din, a key figure in the Brotherhood leadership, said in an interview that the militant activists were students and intellectuals in their teens, twenties, and thirties, daring to the point of recklessness. According to one scholar, the militants were university students, schoolteachers, engineers, physicians, and the like. One study cites Syrian Government figures for 1,384 activists arrested between 1976 and 1981, among whom at least 28 percent were students, 8 percent were schoolteachers, and 13 percent were members of the professions, including 79 engineers, 57 physicians, 25 lawyers, and 10 pharmacists. []

In 1968 irreconcilable militants led by Marwan Hadid, a 34-year-old agronomist and the son of a small agricultural entrepreneur from Hamah, left Syria for Jordan, where they were trained by Palestinians of Arafat’s Fatah organization. Hadid’s doctrines—that there could be no compromise between Islamic and non-Islamic or anti-Islamic systems of government and that the Syrian Ba’thist regime should be dislodged by armed rebellion—drew numerous followers. Hadid himself died in prison in 1976, but “Hadidists” operating under various names were responsible for much of the antiregime violence in the late 1970s. []

With the appearance of the more militant Sunni radical factions, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria has evolved into an even more loosely organized front. In the 1970s the acts of violence were attributed to groups operating under various names—the Youth of Muhammad, the Marwan Hadid Group, the al-Mujahidun, and the Islamic Liberation Party—while more recently the militant faction has taken the name Fighting Vanguard. In some cases, acts attributed to the Muslim Brotherhood by the government probably

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were carried out by Sunni radical splinter groups with little or no affiliation to the formal Muslim Brotherhood hierarchy, but spokesmen for the militants more closely attached to the Brotherhood took credit for them. President Assad's amnesty offer to the militant faction last January probably was designed to widen the splits among the various factions of the Brotherhood.

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